

Odsjek za anglistiku  
Filozofski fakultet  
Sveučilište u Zagrebu

## DIPLOMSKI RAD

Postmodern narrative strategies in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

Književno-kulturološki smjer: Engleska  
književnost i kultura

Kandidat: Ivan Radoš  
Mentorica: dr. sc. Iva Polak, doc.  
Akademska godina: 2014/2015.

# CONTENTS:

1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	4
2.1 TYPOLOGY OF NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION.....	4
2.2 NARRATING SITUATION.....	6
2.2.1 TIME OF NARRATION.....	6
2.2.2 NARRATIVE LEVEL.....	7
2.2.3 EMBEDDING AND FRAMING.....	8
2.2.4 FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE LEVELS.....	9
2.3. <i>MISE-EN-ABYME</i> AND POSTMODERN FICTION.....	10
3. A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE STORY.....	12
4. A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE DISCOURSE.....	15
5. READER'S CIRCULAR JOURNEY(S).....	19
6. STRUCTURE OF EMBEDDING.....	22
6.1 THE CLOUD ATLAS SEXTET.....	24
6.2 THE MATRUSCHYKA DOLL VARIATIONS.....	24
6.3 ETERNAL RECURRENCE.....	25
7. REINCARNATION VS METALEPSIS.....	27
8. THE ATLAS OF CLOUDS.....	33
9. METAFICTIONALITY.....	39
10. CONCLUSION.....	45
11. WORKS CITED.....	46
12. ABSTRACT.....	48
13. KEY WORDS.....	48

## INTRODUCTION

Of all the popular novels of the last decade, *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell, published in 2004, is one of the more daring in exploring the narrative possibilities of the novel by its complex structure of interlinked narratives. It is composed of six different stories, all written in a different style, referring to different time and space. The narrative journey of this novel takes the reader from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century journal to a series of letters written in Europe in between the two world wars, to the 1970s Hawaii and modern day London, to the SF dystopia of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and ultimately to a post-apocalyptic tribal world.

The intricate structure of the novel shapes the reader's experience as an elaborate puzzle-solving quest. The most prominent narrative technique by which *Cloud Atlas* accomplishes its puzzling quality and narrative unity is by a labyrinthine relation of narrative embedding.

This paper will approach this puzzle by trying to answer the following two questions: how is this narrative puzzle structured, and what exactly does it represent? By examining *Cloud Atlas* from the narratological point of view we will analyse its narrative hierarchy and the structure of embedding. This will be followed by analysis of the metafictional, postmodern implications of the novel and its relations to the reader's experience. The paper shall argue that the complex narrative hierarchy of the novel serves to underline the novel's metafictional aspects.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the most basic and therefore crucial distinctions to be made when talking about any complex narrative is that between the story and discourse. Story – *histoire*- as the French structuralists would say, is the basic content of the narrative, “the chain of events (actions and happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting)” (Chatman 19). Discourse – *discours* is the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, “the story is the *what?* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how?*”(Chatman 19).

As Chatman notes, Aristotle is the originator of this concept, for him “the imitation of actions in the real world, *praxis*, was seen as forming an argument, *logos*, from which were selected and possibly rearranged, the units that formed the plot, *mythos*” (Chatman 19). In contemporary literary theory, this distinction was first elaborated by the Russian Formalists, who used the terms fable (*fabula*), or the basic story-line, the sum of events to be related in the narrative, and plot (*sjuzet*), the story as actually told.

## TYPOLGY OF NARRATIVE COMMUNICATION

Every narrative is a communication and therefore it needs at least two parties, a sender and a receiver. Chatman argues that each party entails three different entities – on the sending end are the real author, the implied author, and the narrator (if any); on the receiving end, the real audience (listener, reader, viewer), the implied audience, and the narratee, as is visible in the diagram below:

Real author---- Implied author ---- (Narrator) ---- (Narratee) ---- Implied reader ---- Real reader  
(Chatman 151)

According to the diagram Chatman indicates that only the implied author and implied reader are immanent to a narrative, the narrator and narratee are optional (parentheses). The real author and real reader are “outside the narrative transaction as such, though, of course, indispensable to it in an ultimate practical sense” (151).

As every story requires someone to tell it, there is always some kind of narrator. But, there is a spectrum of possibilities regarding the overtness of the narrator, and it depends on whether the story is directly presented to the audience or mediated by someone. This is the

distinction made by Plato between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, in the modern terms – between showing and telling. On the one end of this spectrum are those stories that are “nonnarrated”, or “minimally narrated” (Chatman 151), i.e. literary narratives that pretend to be constituted by found letters and diaries, where any instance beyond the implied author is just mere collector or an editor, or transcriptions of speech, soliloquies, internal monologues. Chatman claims such stories may be nonnarrated because in such epistolary form every sentence expresses only the then-and-there relationship between the correspondents. The next step is the covert narrator, where the reader hears a distinct voice speaking of events and characters, but s/he “remains hidden in the discursive shadows” (Chatman 197), where s/he express the characters speech or thought in an indirect manner. Finally there is the overt narrator who does not just mediate, but also has a distinct personality, and makes his or her opinions known.

Regardless of the overtness of the narrator, according to Chatman the implied author is always present. This term was first coined by the critic Wayne Booth: “The real author creates not simply an ideal, impersonal man in general, but an implied version of himself that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works” (Booth 70-71). The implied author is reconstructed by the reader from the narrative, as a principle, as the design of the whole; it establishes the norms and the general cultural codes of the narrative. The real author can say whatever s/he likes through his/her implied author. On the other hand, the norms of the narrator, if present in the novel, can diverge completely with the norms of the implied author, the norms of the work as a whole. This is the case of the unreliable narrator, another term coined by Wayne Booth: “I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not” (Booth 158).

The implied reader is the counterpart of the implied author, it is the audience presupposed by the narrative itself. And just like in the case of the relation between the implied author and the narrator, there may or may not be a narratee, but the implied reader is always present as of principle. S/he may materialize as a character in the world of the work or there may be no overt references to him/her at all, though his/her presence is felt. As Chatman notes, “the narratee character is only one device by which the implied author informs the real reader how to perform as an implied reader, which Weltanschauung to adopt” (150). In narratives without explicit narrates, the stance of the implied reader can only be inferred on ordinary cultural and moral terms. The situation of the narratee is parallel to that of the narrator: s/he ranges from a fully characterized individual to no one.

## NARRATING SITUATION

Further narratological terms that we will use come from Gérard Genette's seminal narratological study *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method*. For our discussion of *Cloud Atlas* a very important term is the narrating situation, which, according to Genette, is a "tight web of connections among the narrating act, its protagonists, its spatio-temporal determinations, its relationship to the other narrating situations involved in the same narrative, etc" (215). Genette proposes three differential categories involved in every narrating situation – time of the narrating, narrating person and narrative level.

## TIME OF NARRATING

The chief temporal determination of the narrating instance is its position relative to the story. Genette differentiates four temporal positions of narrating:

- subsequent narrating – the classical and most frequent position of the past-tense narrative.
- prior narrating – in the future tense, which hardly appear in the modern literary corpus, except as inserted premonitory dreams or prophecies in some narratives, but was more common in older "predictive" narratives – "prophetic, apocalyptic, oracular, astrological, chiromantic, cartomantic, oneiromantic, etc" (216).
- simultaneous – narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action, of which the most obvious example is live radio or television reporting, but is also found in some modernist text which are "behaviourist" (219) in type, like Hemingway's "Hills like white elephants", or in the style of the French "new novel", and also, on the other end, in the novels that are completely based on interior monologue.
- interpolated – "between the moments of the action" (217), found, for example, in journals and epistolary correspondence, or novels in those forms, which combine the quasi-interior monologue and the account after the event, the live and the pre-recorded account.

## NARRATIVE LEVEL

The next fundament of the narrating situation is the narrative level. Genette makes a crucial distinction between the level at which the act of narration takes place and the level of the recounted action by saying that:

....any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed. M. de Renoncourt's writing of his fictive *Memoires* is a literary act carried out at a first level, which we will call extradiegetic; the events told in those *Memoires* (including Des Grieux's narrating act) are inside this first narrative, so we will describe them; diegetic, or intradiegetic; the events told in Des Grieux's narrative; a narrative in the second degree, we will call metadiegetic. (228)

To recount, narrative levels are levels at which the narrating act and the narratee are situated in relation to the narrated story. On the outermost level, external to the intradiegetic (or diegetic, i.e. first-level) narrative, the extradiegetic narrator recounts what occurred at that first level; a character in that story can, in turn, become an intradiegetic narrator whose narrative, at the second level, will then be a metadiegetic narrative. This process can extend to further meta-levels, forming a series of narratives patterned recursively in the fashion of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls. Genette's narrative levels are characterized by a relation of inclusion, they are distributed vertically when a change of both (diegetic) level and speaker and/or addressee occurs, and horizontally when no change of speaker takes place (as in a digression) or when several parallel stories are recounted by different speakers but at the same narrative level (as in Boccaccio's *Decameron*). As this is a spatio-temporal system, the narrator and the narratee correspond on the same diegetic level. Therefore an intradiegetic narrator corresponds with an intradiegetic narratee, and the extradiegetic narratee only has an extradiegetic narratee, which can easily be termed the implied reader, with which the real reader can identify (or not, in some cases).

In Genette's model, the notion of narrative level is inseparable from the notion of the narrating person, which is "the sum of the relations between the narrator—plus, should the occasion arise, his or their narratee(s)—and the story he tells" (229). He distinguishes between two types of narrative: heterodiegetic – where the narrator is absent from the story s/he tells, i.e. Homer in the *Iliad*, or Flaubert in *Sentimental Education* – and homodiegetic – where the narrator is present as a character in the story he tells i.e. - Gil Blas, or Lockwood in

*Wuthering Heights*). If the narrator is the main protagonist, the hero, not a mere bystander, of his/her narrative than this homodiegetic narrative can be further classified as autodiegetic. In Genette's system the narrative level and the narrator person are inseparable, and they form the narrating situation, establishing a four-part typology of the narrator.

Extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrators are often termed "omniscient", which may not be the case in many modern novels, however, as Rimmon-Kennan notes, the characteristics connoted by it are still relevant, namely: "familiarity, in principle, with the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings; knowledge of past, present and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied (e.g. on a lonely stroll or during a love scene in a locked room); and knowledge of what happens in several places at the same time"(95).

## EMBEDDING AND FRAMING

It is important to distinguish the notion of narrative levels, as postulated by Genette, from the traditional notions of narrative framing and embedding. Although they are often misunderstood as being synonymous, the notion of narrative levels is wider and encompasses both of these cases. As we mentioned earlier, every narrative, embedded or not, exists through a narrative act which is necessarily external to the spatiotemporal universe within which the events of that narrative take place, and is therefore situated in a web of narrating instances. Narrative levels come into play only with a shift of voice, for example "the dream sequences introduced into Nerval's *Aurélie* do not represent changes of level since there is no change of narrator" (Coste and Pier 11). Narrative levels provide a set of principles with which both frame stories and embedded stories can be described. Basically, a process of embedding occurs in both types, but there is a crucial difference "whereas frame stories, usually short, serve to bracket the main story (e.g. the expository pages to Marlow's narrative in *Heart of Darkness*), embedded stories, of limited duration, remain subordinate to the primary narrative (e.g. the novella "The Curious Impertinent" in *Don Quixote*)" (Coste and Pier 11). This relation can be summed as follows: "If the tale is conceptualized as subsidiary to the primary story frame, a relationship of embedding obtains; if the primary story level serves as a mere introduction to the narrative proper, it will be perceived as a framing device" (Fludernik 343).

A proper case of embedding occurs when three criteria are met: "when there is insertion (attributive discourse provides a link between two discourses), subordination (which excludes juxtaposition), and homogeneity (e.g. one sequence inserted into another)" ( Coste



and Pier 11). Because all these relations come under the prefix hypo, some theorists, like Rimmon-Kenan proposed that “metanarrative” and “metadiegetic” be replaced, respectively, by “hyponarrative” and “hypodiegetic” – a level below rather than in the diegetic level (Coste and Pier 11).

## FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE LEVELS

Regarding the purpose of metadiegetic narratives, Genette differentiates three main types of relationships that can connect the metadiegetic narrative to the first narrative, into which it is inserted:

- (a) explanatory, “in which there is a link of direct causality between the events of the diegesis and those of the metadiegesis conferring on the second narrative an explanatory function” (Genette 232). Such narratives explain something or answer some questions about the events leading to the current situation.
- (b) thematic relationship, which implies no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis: “a relationship of contrast (the deserted Ariadne's unhappiness, in the midst of Thetis' joyous wedding) or of analogy (as when Jocabel, in *Moyse sauve*, hesitates to execute the divine command and Amram tells her the story of Abraham's sacrifice)” (Genette 233). If this analogy is pushed far enough and the narratives are almost identical, we have a curious case of *mise-en-abyme*, as the embedded narrative mirrors or reproduces in miniature the embedding narrative or the work as a whole. This is often the case in many postmodern novels, including *Cloud Atlas*, and we will discuss this function later on.
- (c) narrational, which involves no explicit relationship between the two story levels, it is the act of narrating itself that fulfills a function in the diegesis, independently of the metadiegetic content – “a function of distraction, for example, and/or of obstruction” (Genette 233). The most famous example of this function is *A Thousand and One Nights*, where Scheherazade tells tales to the Sultan in order to defer her execution.

As we will examine later on, the structure of embedded narratives in *Cloud Atlas* makes use of all three Genette's functions of narrative levels.

## MISE-EN-ABYME AND POSTMODERN FICTION

The structure of *Cloud Atlas* heavily relies on the use of *mise-en-abyme* structures. In order to define this term, we will follow McHale who claims that it is determined by three criteria:

First, it is nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation resembles (copies, says Hofstadter) something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this “something” that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation reproduces or duplicates the primary representation as a whole. Such a salient and continuous aspect might be, for instance, the story at the primary level, or its narrative situation (narrator, narratee, act of narration, and so on); or the style or poetics of the primary narrative text. (125)

According to McHale *mise-en-abyme* structures may be found in all periods, in all genres and literary modes, but it was developed and exploited extensively primarily in postmodernist writing because “*mise-en-abyme* is another form of short-circuit, another disruption of the logic of narrative hierarchy, every bit as disquieting as a character stepping across the ontological threshold to a different narrative level” (125). The logic of narrative hierarchy McHale mentions here relates to the aspect of story. Each change of narrative levels in recursive narrative structures also invokes a change of narrative worlds, a change of ontological levels on the level of the story. These embedded or nested worlds may be more or less continuous with the world of the primary diegesis, subtly different, or even radically different and presented as a fictional, occupying an even more fictional level in the fictional world of the narrative. According to McHale there is always some kind of ontological discontinuity between the primary diegesis and hypodiegetic worlds, but this discontinuity does not always need to be ontologically foregrounded, but rather epistemologically, as in many realist and modernist novels, where each narrative link functions as a link in a chain of narrative transmission: “Here recursive structure serves as a tool for exploring issues of narrative authority, reliability and unreliability, the circulation of knowledge and so forth” (113).

McHale’s general thesis about modernist fiction is that its dominant is epistemological. The term “dominant” here comes from Roman Jakobson who defined it as:

the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure...a poetic work is a structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierarchy..." (Jakobson qtd. in McHale 6)

It is important to note that the dominant is a plural concept that can be applied not only to the individual literary text and the synchronic and diachronic organization of the literary system, but also to the analysis of the verse medium in general, of verbal art and of cultural history as "different dominants emerge depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it" (McHale 6).

According to McHale, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground epistemological questions such as: "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" (9). Other typical modernist questions might be added:

What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on. (9)

According to Jakobson, the process of literary-historical change, the evolution of the poetic form is primarily a question of the shifting dominant, the shift in the mutual relationship of the components of the system: elements which were originally secondary become essential and primary, and the previously dominant ones become subsidiary and optional. Gradually, there is a shift of the dominant in the narrative fiction, from epistemological to ontological narrative strategies, which involve paradoxes of various kinds, deconstruction of narrative logic, *mise-en-abyme* and various other recursive structures, all aimed at confusing the reader about the ontological and narrative status of the story "foregrounding the ontological dimensions of the Chinese box of fiction" (McHale 114). These narrative strategies engage and foreground "post-cognitive" questions like: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" (McHale 10). Other typical postmodern questions, according to McHale, are:

What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is

the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (11)

As we will examine thoroughly later on, *Cloud Atlas*, by its complex narrative and ontological structure, is a firmly postmodern text that asks these questions all the time and never gives a final answer to any of these questions.

## A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE STORY

Before we analyse the novel on the level of the discourse, for the sake of further reference we will provide a basic outline of the events and the time-frames of the stories.

*Cloud Atlas* as a novel is composed of six different stories, each set in a different time period, but connected by an intricate system of embedding as each tale is read (or observed) by the main character in the next, appearing in a form of a written or recorded document or as an instance of oral storytelling.

The first story, “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing”, takes place around 1850 in the South Pacific, and is written in the form of journal entries of one Adam Ewing, a young notary from San Francisco, who is travelling back home from Australia after seeking the beneficiary of a will. He meets and befriends an eccentric English doctor, Henry Goose, while marooned briefly on the Chatham Islands (one of the islands of New Zealand) during ship repairs, and Goose continues the journey with him on the ship *Prophetess*. During his stay he learns about the island’s brutal colonial past, the extinction and enslavement of the indigenous tribe of Moriori by the warlike Maori, and witnesses a flogging of Moriori slave by a Maori man. When the ship sails, Ewing finds that the man being flogged, called Autua, has stowed away in his cabin. Ewing helps Autua and presents him to the captain, who reluctantly takes him on as part of the crew in exchange for his passage. During their travel, they stop at the island of Raiatea, where he observes missionaries preaching to the indigenous peoples, whom they regard as savages and treat as slaves. Back on the ship, he falls ill, realizing at the last minute that Dr. Goose – who may not be a doctor at all – is poisoning him to steal his possessions. He is rescued by Autua, and having been saved by a slave, resolves to devote his life to the abolitionist movement. *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* is later published by Ewing's son Jackson.

The second story, “Letters from Zedelghem”, takes place in 1931, and is set in Zedelghem, near Bruges, Belgium. It is told in the form of letters of one Robert Frobisher, a

young English musician, to his friend and lover Rufus Sixsmith. Frobisher, due to being recently disowned and completely broke, travels to Zedelghem to offer his services as an amanuensis to a renowned composer Vyvyan Ayr, who is slowly dying of syphilis. He auditions and is accepted by Ayr, and helps him compose his music, rejuvenating his spirit. He also develops some of his own compositions, and loots and sells antique books he finds in the castle, among which he finds *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*. Frobisher becomes involved sexually with Ayr's wife Jocasta, but later falls in love with Ayr's daughter Eva. Empowered by Frobisher's help, Ayr eventually starts directly stealing his musical ideas while blackmailing him about revealing to the musical world the Frobisher's affair with his wife. After an unrequited love affair with Ayr's daughter Eva, Frobisher becomes despondent, leaves to finish his own *magnum opus*, *The Cloud Atlas Sextet*, sends it to Sixsmith with his last letter, and commits suicide.

The third story, "Half-lives-The First Luisa Rey Mystery", takes place in the fictional city of Buenas Yervas, California, in 1975, and is written in the style of a pulp thriller. The main character is one Luisa Rey, a young, idealistic journalist. She accidentally meets the same Rufus Sixsmith, who is employed as an atomic engineer for the Seaboard Corporation, while stuck in the elevator. He confides to her that the new nuclear power plant is not as safe as they advertise it to be. In the rest of this action packed story, Sixsmith is murdered by his unscrupulous employers, Luisa Rey finds his damning safety report, along with Frobisher's letters and a recording of the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*, evades multiple attempts at her life, and eventually publishes the report, exposing the machinations of the Seaboard corporation, and attracting a lot of media attention – reporters, government officials and Hollywood scriptwriters.

Next story, "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", takes place in the present-day London. The main protagonist is Timothy Cavendish, a 65-year-old vanity publisher, struggling to keep his business afloat. He finally achieves success, however, when one of his clients, a gangster Dermot "Duster" Hoggins, a writer of the autobiographical *Knuckle Sandwich*, murders an uncomplimentary critic, making his book a great success. Soon after, when the royalties start kicking in, the author's brothers forcefully demand their share of the profits and threaten Cavendish. He flees London by train, carrying with him the manuscript for a novel *Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. However, the hotel his brother sets him up in turns out to be a retirement home, which Cavendish suspects is his brother's revenge for his endless pleas for financial aid, and maybe for sleeping with his wife, a long time ago. Cavendish finds himself trapped, and suffers various humiliations and harassments at the hand

of the devilish nurse Oakes. Eventually, he befriends some of the residents of the nursing home, and they hatch a rather haphazard but successful plan to escape. From Edinburgh, Cavendish manages to scrap up the remains of his publishing business, and makes a deal with Dermot's brothers, cutting them into the future royalties of the *Knuckle Sandwich – The Movie*. He starts writing his memoirs, in which he plans to describe his picaresque nursing home adventure, and possibly make a film script of his own, and also contacts the author of the *Half-Lives* to deliver the second part of the manuscript.

“An Orison of Sonmi~451” takes place approximately one hundred years later, in a dystopian futuristic state in the East Asia, called Nea So Copros, in the place of the present day Korea. This is a totalitarian society, where consumerism has taken its final fiendish form, and the huge “pureblood” consumer class is served by genetically engineered clones called “fabricants”. This story is told in the form of an interview between one such fabricant, Sonmi~451 and an “archivist” recording her story. Sonmi~451 works in a fast food restaurant called Papa Song's. Although the fabricants consciousness is stunted through chemical manipulation – ingestion of substance called “Soap”, Sonmi~451 gains awareness and an ability to learn and to retain knowledge. She is moved to a university to be studied, where she gets involved with the subversive underground organisation – the Union. After discovering that old fabricants do not retire to Hawaii, but are instead secretly slaughtered for food and bio-matter and Soap, Sonmi~451 is inspired to write her fabricant rights tract referred to as Declarations. She is then arrested, tried and questioned for the government archives. She reveals that she knows everything that happened to her was in fact instigated by the government, to create an artificial enemy figure to encourage the oppression of fabricants by purebloods, but she believes her Declarations will be inspirational nonetheless. Her last wish before being executed is to finish watching the film she began called *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*

The final story in *Cloud Atlas* “Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After” takes place in a post-apocalyptic world where humanity has reverted to tribalism. One such tribe lives in the present day Hawaii, and Zachry, an old man from the peaceful tribe of Valleysmen, tells a story from his youth. His people were peaceful farmers, who were often raided by the bloodthirsty tribe of Kona from the other side of the island. They also worshipped Sonmi as a goddess. They are sometime visited by the technologically sophisticated people known as the Prescients, the only ones retaining the technology and knowledge before the cataclysm. They sometimes come to trade and to study the natives, and one Prescient called Meronym stays with Zachry's tribe for a while. An invasion from the savage tribe of Kona leaves most of

Zachry's tribe dead or enslaved, but he and Meronym manage to escape to another island, and she leaves with him an advanced multimedia device called orison, containing the original holographic recordings of Sonmi~451. The story ends with Zachry's son claiming his father told many strange stories, but he has inherited his father's orison, and he often watches the recordings of Sonmi, although he does not really understand what she is saying.

## A SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE DISCOURSE

After we retold the basic plot of these stories, we will describe their basic narrating situations using Genette's terms we laid out earlier, and comment on their basic style, language and genre.

"The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" is, as its name suggests, an epistolary narrative, written in separate entries, each written immediately after the action took place, and it is autodiegetic because the narrator is also the protagonist. Ewing at one point claims that his children are the intended readers of his journal, its narratees. In the story we also find footnotes by one J.E., which we can only assume is Ewing's son Jackson, who has probably edited and published his father's journal.

"Letters from Zedelghem" takes form of a series of letters written by Robert Frobisher to his friend Rufus Sixsmith. Obviously, this is also an epistolary homodiegetic (autodiegetic) narrative. Frobisher describes his adventures as they happen, and he addresses Sixsmith in each of his letters, who, therefore, is the narratee.

These first two narratives, being epistolary narratives, presented as found documents – an unmediated narrative text, do not presuppose an outside narrator, but the next narrative – "Half-Lives - The First Luisa Rey Mystery" is overtly narrated by a heterodiegetic extradiegetic (omniscient) narrator with a number of focalising characters. It is written in a style of modern thriller, with numbered chapters.

"The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish" returns to homodiegetic narration. Unlike "Letters from Zedelghem" and "The Pacific Journal", this is not an epistolary narrative or a journal but is narrated in the past tense, with a pronounced retrospective gaze, and is therefore an example of subsequent narrating. Also, unlike a true private journal, in which the narratee is usually the writer himself (or his children, like in Ewing's case) Cavendish directly addresses the reader. We could say that this is some kind of a memoir, Cavendish's attempt to describe his adventure in a form of an ironical, witty narrative.

“An Orison of Sonmi~451” is structured as an interview between Sonmi and the so-called Archivist, before her trial and sentence, an attempt to make clear why she did what she did. It is also non-narrated, because it is presented as a document, an official recording of one long conversation, in which Sonmi and the Archivist are both narrators and narratees. Sonmi subsequently recounts her adventures, so she is an autodiegetic narrator.

“Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After” is presented as an instance of oral storytelling, of one Zachry telling a story from his youth to younger members of his tribe, while sitting by the campfire and roasting some mutton. After he finishes his story, another voice appears, and claims: “Zachry, my old pa was a wyrd buggah” (324), so we can assume this is Zachry’s son, who has heard this story many times from his father, so the story we read is actually his retelling of his father’s story, which is an instance of a subsequent autodiegetic narrative.

As we can see, almost every narrative here, except “Half-Lives”, is an intradiegetic homodiegetic narrative, therefore told through different voices, employing different styles, corresponding with the character of the narrator and its spatio-temporal situation. If every story was written in a clear, extra diegetic, heterodiegetic style of “Half - Lives”, with one unifying authoritarian narrative voice, *Cloud Atlas* would be a much more “quiet” novel, so to say, a “monological” novel, to use one of the terms introduced by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. In such novels, there is only one transcendent perspective, one unifying consciousness and language, and one ultimate truth stemming from it, characters do not have independent viewpoints, they exist only to transmit the author’s ideology. But, according to Bakhtin, the novel should represent the inherently dialogic qualities of the discourse itself, it should include many different languages and perspectives: “The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language—that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological universe”. (Bakhtin 366)

If the novel aims to be true to the discursive reality, according to Bakhtin, it should not be held together only by the author’s voice, but rather employ plurality of independent voices, each with its own world and language. The interweaving of different registers in the text of the novel produces the effect of “heteroglossia, plurality of discourse which serves as the vehicle for the confrontation and dialogue among worldviews and ideologies in the novel, its orchestrated polyphony of voices”. (McHale 167)

As Bakhtin argues, this diversity of speech and points of view is the very basis of the novel:



Every language in the novel is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups and their embodied representatives. Insofar as language is not perceived as a unique socio-ideological system it cannot be material for orchestration, it cannot become the image of a language. On the other hand, any point of view on the world fundamental to the novel must be a concrete, socially embodied point of view, not an abstract, purely semantic position; it must, consequently, have its own language with which it is organically united. A novel is constructed not on abstract differences in meaning nor on merely narrative collisions, but on concrete social speech diversity. (Bakhtin 411-12)

In this regard, Bakhtin would be quite pleased with *Cloud Atlas*, because this novel is a fine example of polyphony. We could say that *Cloud Atlas* employs the dialogical principle not only on the level of the characters, but on the level of narrative organization, because each story represents one worldview, one language, one speech, and they interact with each other in a complex metafictional way, which we will analyse anon.

The language corresponds with and shapes the world of its narrative, which is most obvious in the linguistic experiments of the narratives that take place in the future – Sonmi~451's and Zachry's. The language of Sonmi~451's narrative reflects the centrality of consumer culture to life in Neo So Corpus. It uses numerous new coinages: ford for car, kodak for photograph; people are equipped with their sony, they wear nikes and rolex. Brands have replaced common nouns, and they are not even distinguished by capitalisation. Sandrine Sorlin argues that "in this consumerdom everything has been de-sacralised, or rather, only one thing is sacred: business" (Sorlin 77). According to Sorlin, in Sonmi's story, discourse seems to be the result of a political manipulation that has hampered with its natural evolution. As Sorlin argues: "As everything in that society is sterile, scientific, artificial and strictly codified, so is the language. A soul is a new word for a microchip" (Sorlin 84). In "Sloosha", however, the nuclear apocalypse appears to have liberated language from those artificial grammatical shackles: "the new language is powerfully alive and appears to have come back to its 'essential' state." (76) The language of Zachry's tribe reflects their post-apocalyptic linguistic return to nature. For instance, what used to be scientific and therefore exclusively human term – "observatories" is now written "observ'trees". Most comparisons take nature as their standard of comparison: "my eyes got owlier" (Mitchell 138), "slipp'ry as cave fish, heavyas a cow, cold as stones"(128), "shedin'tb'have like no queeny-bee" (134), "lornsomer'nabird in a box in a well" (145). Zachry's tribe uses a lot of creative metaphors and comparisons and as, Sorlin argues, it has a powerfully poetic aspect: "far from the perfect,

military sounds of the first language (as in 'the crush of consumers cleared in an instant', for instance), it seems to follow the rhythm of life.“ (86).

In other narratives language also plays an important role. In Cavendish's story, for example, a recognition of one's ethnicity on the basis of language plays a crucial part in the action of the story, and saves Cavendish and his friends from being captured by their pursuers:

Mr Meeks pointed at Withers with skeletal forefinger and intoned this ancient curse:

'Those there English gerrrrunts are trampling o'er ma God-gi'en rrrights. Theeve used me an'ma pals morst direly an' we're inneed of a wee *assistance*!'

Withers growled at us: 'Come quiet and face your punishments.'

Our captor's southern Englishness was out! (Mitchell 400, italics in the original)

Cavendish and his friends are in a Scottish pub, a football match is on, Scotland lost to England, and these language differences lead to Cavendish's captors being brutalized by enraged Scots in the pub. The humour of this narrative is achieved by the burlesque discrepancy between Cavendish's overly educated style, full of highbrow literary references (i.e. his perpetual lavatory read is *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), and the banal, degrading events that befall him, i.e. being beat up a by a three teenage girls with lollipops, whom he berated for littering:

But as we drew level they tore wrappers off their lurid ice-lollies and just dropped them. My sense of well-being was utterly V-2'd. I mean, we were on the level with the bin! Tim Cavendish the Disgusted Citizen exclaimed to the offenders: 'You know, you should pick those up'. A snorted 'Whatchyooo gonna do'bout'it?' glanced off my back. (147)

The contrast of Cavendish's verbal adjective "V-2'd", recalling the second world war, and modern teen pronunciation, illustrates the dimension of speech as a marker of identity and age, of which Cavendish is very well aware. In one scene he ponders the hardships of old age and remarks: "Language, too, will leave you behind, betraying your tribal affiliations whenever you speak". (180-81)

In Frobisher's story, his own language, with its numerous mentions of composers and music overall, reflects his occupation as a musician, and his perception of the world, which is based on aural impressions, as he sees the world in the terms of music:

Gardener made a bonfire of fallen leaves- just came in from it. The heat on one's face and hands, the sad smoke, the crackling and wheezing fire. Reminds me of the groundsman's hut at Gresham. Anyway, got a gorgeous passage from the fire-percussion for crackling, alto bassoon for the wood, and a restless flute for the flames. Finished transcribing it this very minute. Air in the chateau clammy like laundry that won't dry. Door-banging draughts down the passageways. (86)

Ewing's language also reflects his personality, as a morally upright, but naïve young man, constantly surprised by the brutality of the world, seeking comfort and moral guidance in journaling: "I come to my journal as a Catholick to a confessor.... I shall describe what befell me this day, steering as close to the facts as is possible." (18). Ewing as a writer of a travel log is somewhat farsighted – he is good at recording other people's stories, he is interested in the history of the places he visits and is a good conversationalist, but he is also an exceptionally bad judge of character, which almost cost him his life, "but made him quite the philosopher" (527).

Overall, each of these stories is a unique experience, and does not feel out of place or seem unconvincing, which is not an easy task for the writer, because it requires a lot of familiarity with the genres of the stories, and a capacity to emulate the style of its most prominent writers. This Mitchell's ventriloquist feat was noted by critics. As Hicks notes - "Indeed, Mitchell conspicuously pays homage to Daniel Defoe, Herman Melville, Oscar Wilde, Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Ken Kesey, Russell Hoban, and Margaret Atwood, among others."

## READER'S CIRCULAR JOURNEY(S)

Although the narratives that make up this narrative are so peculiar in their differences and at a first glance may even appear to stand independently, *Cloud Atlas* is by no means just a collection of short stories, and the novel gradually reveals its complex narrative structure. Although the stories seem disparate, both on the level of the story and discourse, this is still a unified novel, and the way these stories intertwine is by a complex structure of embedding, which is gradually exposed to the unsuspecting reader.

Initially, the reader is taken by surprise. Just as s/he starts reading "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", the story is cut mid-sentence: "Reading my entry for the 15<sup>th</sup> October, when first I met Rafael" (39). The reader is then thrown into another seemingly completely

unrelated story, happening almost a century later, on another continent, with other characters. This situation is repeated again, each story is cut in half, until the reader reaches “Sloosha’s Crossin”, which is the only one told in full, without cuts. The reader can now logically expect the resolution, and since the narratives are cut in half and ascend chronologically up to “Sloosha”, it can be expected that they will descend chronologically down to the “Pacific Journal” again.

In the same way, the reader is informed about the relations of embedding that connect the stories through the corresponding actions of the characters. For example: Robert Frobisher finds the “edited journal of a voyage from Sydney to California by a notary of San Francisco named Adam Ewing” (64). In “Half-Lives”, Dr Rufus Sixsmith reads a sheaf of letters written to him nearly half a century ago by his friend Robert Frobisher (112). In “The Ghastly Ordeal” Cavendish receives “a package containing a MS titled *Half-Lives*” (157-158). In “An Orison of Sonmi~451”, a couple of pages before the end of the first part Hae-Joo shows Sonmi-“one of the greatest movies ever made by any director, from any age: *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*.” (243) In “Sloosha’s Crossin” the recording of Sonmi is introduced when Zachry rifles through Meronym’s belongings and finds her egg-like orison, which makes some kind of a ghost-girl appear –“she was talkin’ in Old’un tongue, an’ not p’formin’ none, jus’ answerin’ questions what a man’s hushly voice asked.” (277)

What this achieves is that the reader is at the same time made aware of the structure of the embedding and its unorthodox organization. In most narratives, subordination of the narratives goes from the highest (if we are using Rimmon-Kenan terminology for narrative levels) diegetic level down to the lowest level, zooming in; a character tells a tale in which someone else tells a tale, in which someone else tells a tale and so on. In this novel, however, the reader goes up the diegetic levels s/he zooms out until it reaches “Sloosha’s Crossin”. The realization that this is the highest diegetic level occurs when the reader starts descending diegetic levels again, this time in reverse order. This achieves the effect of engaging the reader to look for clues and parallels in each narrative, s/he is repeatedly forced to re-contextualise past narratives as subsequent ones present them in new ways. The reader can at no moment discard the narrative frames as something unimportant, or even forget about them, because s/he is forced to travel up and down the narrative hierarchy.

The reader’s anticipation to read the second part of the narratives is repeated on the level of the characters in the novel, whose reading of their hypodiegetic narratives is also cut in half. Sonmi last wish is to “finish viewing a film I began watching when, for an hour in my life, I knew happiness” (365). After his adventure, Cavendish contacts the author of the *Half-*

*Lives* to deliver the second part: “Mrs Latham got on the e-mail to Hilary V. Hush to express our interest in *Half-Lives*, and the postman delivered part two not an hour ago.” (403) In a similar twist of fate, Luisa Rey receives by mail the final eight letters of Robert Frobisher and enjoys a Proustian olfactory moment: “She removes one of the yellowed envelopes, postmarked 10 October 1931, holds it against her nose, and inhales.” (453) Frobisher is quite destitute when he is cut off in his reading of Ewing’s diary, for as he says, “half-read book is a half-finished love affair.” (64-65) He has “one last serendipitous discovery” (478) before his untimely end, and finds under his bed the second part of the book: “Would you believe it? Slipped the ½ book into my valise. Will finish reading gobbling it down v. soon. ” (479)

This peculiar narrative form resembles a Chinese box of fiction, as McHale would say, because each story is embedded into another story. We could also use the term *mise-en-abyme* for these recursive structures because they fulfil all three McHale’s criteria – they are embedded into each other, their nested representations are all similar, they copy each other, the actions of the protagonists are all similar, they all repeat the same actions, which are indeed a salient and continuous aspect of the primary world: they duplicate the primary representation as a whole.

We need to ask ourselves what kind of reader is encoded in the text of the novel and can follow all these postmodern *mise-an-abyme* complexities? According to Christine Brooke-Rose’s study *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, there are three possible encoded readers of every literary text, depending on how much the code of the text is determined. When the code is over-determined the reader is underdetermined – “hypocrite”, when the code is under-determined the reader is overdetermined – “hypercrite” and when the code is non-determined the reader is also non-determined – the so called “hypnocrite” reader. According to Brooke-Rose,

code is over determined when its information (narrative, ironic, hermeneutic, symbolic) is too clear, over-encoded, recurring beyond purely informative need. The reader is then in one sense also over encoded, and does in fact sometimes appear in the text, dramatised, like an extra character: the Dear Reader. But in another sense he is treated as a kind of fool who has to be told everything, a subcritical (hypo-crite) reader. (106)

On the other hand, the code can be under-determined, information can be withheld, and the whole story can be blurry. In that case, the reader is expected to fill the gaps, to cooperate actively and be more critical and engaged in the decoding of the text – a kind of “hypercrite” reader.

What kind of reader is encoded in *Cloud Atlas*? When reading the novel for the first time, the reader is definitely expected to do some work by him/herself, because the novel's narrative structures surprises at every turn. Through the entire first reading, the reader is encoded as hypercrite, because s/he needs to be critical to jump from various narrative levels and then connect the stories retrospectively. The first reading is all about connecting and establishing relations between the stories. But, when the basic structure of narrative embedding is revealed to the reader, it is obvious that s/he has no particular choice anymore. On the level of the novel as such, on the level that unifies these stories, they are over-encoded, and the reader becomes hypocritical, confounded by the complexity of the novel's narrative structure.

At this point, it would seem that the importance of each single story wanes, as the reader set's his/her eyes on a larger narrative, the novel as a whole, its system of organization, hoping to find some unifying answers. We could even use Lyotard's terms here, like *petits récits* for individual stories, and *grand récit* for the larger story, the unifying metanarrative of the novel as a whole which undermines the meaning of each singular *petit récit* that makes up the novel. Lyotard succinctly defines the postmodern as: "incredulity toward metannarratives. (...) The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language (...) Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?" (Lyotard xxiv) In this case, if a clear system of organization – a fixed metanarrative – were revealed, the novel would could not be regarded as postmodern in Lyotard's sense, and would probably be an example of modernist fiction with an epistemological dominant, deploying strategies which engage and foreground epistemological questions.

## STRUCTURE OF EMBEDDING

The reader's search for a unifying metanarrative that would explain the story is in fact a search for narrative hierarchy, for a story that is at the highest diegetic level and thereby embeds and subordinates all other narratives. But, the organization of the novel on the level of narrative discourse and its complicated structures of narrative mediation make this problematic.

On the level of discourse "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" is the outermost frame, the novel begins and ends with this story. But this only explains the order of the stories and the reader's experience of the reading the novel for the first time. But, on the level of the

story and the logic of narrative embedding “Sloosha's Crossin’” is at the top diegetic level. Every other story is embedded in it, therefore we should be able to explain the structure of narrative transmission that connects “Sloosha's Crossin’” with all other stories, up to “The Pacific Journal”.

As we already mentioned, Zachry's son is the actual storyteller of “Sloosha's Crossin’”, and is therefore the narrator at the highest diegetic level. He is also in the possession of the vaunted orison. After he tells his story to whomever is there, in order to give some credibility to his father's story he turns on the orison, which projects a holographic recording of the interview between Sonmi and the Archivist. In this projection Sonmi watches the movie *The Ghastly ordeal of Timothy Cavendish*, in which Timothy Cavendish reads a manuscript called *Half Lives: the First Luisa Rey Mystery*, in which the eponymous character reads the letters of Robert Frobisher, who in turn finds and reads *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing*. The problem here is a discrepancy in the narrative transmission between the reader of the novel and the characters in the story. Sonmi mentions watching a movie about Cavendish, while the reader is presented with his written memoir. Furthermore, how can this movie Sonmi watches embed in itself a written narrative? What is interesting here is that the Cavendish's decision at the end of his memoir to turn his story into a film script has obviously bore fruit: “I shall find a hungry ghost-writer to turn these notes you've been reading into a film script of my own.” (Mitchell 403). However, even if this movie is meant to stand for the memoir, how can we then reach “Half-Lives”, and other hypodiegetic narratives? How can all these texts be embedded within a movie?

One possible solution is to interpret the orison as some kind of a multimedia hypertextual artefact, which does not just show recorded projections, but also projects movies, and displays written texts, and is described in the novel as follows: “Now, this silver-egg shaped device is called an orison. It records both an image of your face and your words” (187). Therefore, all the narratives could be accessed by it, but this would eliminate the vertical structure of embedding, because all the subnarratives would be embedded horizontally, on a single level, just below orison. Besides, there is no indication in the novel that Zachry's son is capable of understanding an interface of a high-tech multimedia device since he barely knows how to turn it on.

It would seem that the highest diegetic level cannot be discerned so easily through plain narrative logic and that the *Cloud Atlas* is not a neat collection of stories within stories, that are connected logically top to bottom, in a neat epistemological pyramid. It would seem that there are impossible inconsistencies here, but the novel still tempts us to find and impose

a firm structure, with many obvious clues alluding to its organization scattered throughout its stories.

### THE CLOUD ATLAS SEXTET

One of the most obvious clues the novel provides about its narrative composition is found in “Letters from Zedelghem”. This is to be expected since the main characters are music composers who often discuss musical theory and composition. The protagonist and the narrator Robert Frobisher fulfils his artistic destiny by composing his magnum opus called “The Cloud Atlas Sextet”:

Spent the fortnight gone in the music room, reworking my year's fragments into a ‘sextet for overlapping soloists’: piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe and violin, each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the 1st set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the 2nd, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished, and by then it'll be too late, but it's the 1st thing I think of when I wake, and the last thing I think of before I fall asleep, even if J. is in my bed. She should understand, the artist lives in two worlds. (463)

It is obvious here that the composition of this “sextet for overlapping soloist... each in its own language of key, scale, and colour” (436), in which each solo is interrupted by its successor, relates directly to the structure of the novel itself. Key can easily be replaced with narrator, scale with style, and colour with setting. But, the parallel goes only so far, because there is no mention of the hierarchy of the instruments, they are all on the same diegetic level, so to speak. Music cannot be used to illustrate the narrative hierarchy due to its strictly linear nature, it can only go forward in time.

### THE MATRUSCHYKA DOLL VARIATIONS

However, Frobisher initially admires his employer Vyvyan Arys, as a composer of a piece called “Matruschyka Doll Variations” (52). We can easily imagine this set of wooden dolls of decreasing size placed one inside the other as a structural principle of the novel. Another variation of this structure that we already mentioned would be McHale’s postmodernist Chinese boxes. However, it would be hard to imagine how this would sound as a musical composition. If we take these nested wooden dolls as analogous to the stories *Cloud Atlas*,



each one embedded in other, we must then decide which one is the largest and which one is the smallest. Is “Sloosha’s Crossin’” the smallest doll in the centre, or is it the largest one? How do we approach this spatial metaphor regarding the problem of the framing narrative and the embedded narratives?

Let us say that “Sloosha’s Crossin’” is the smallest one, because it is the only one which is not interrupted, it cannot be dismantled into two pieces, it stands in the centre of the novel’s structure. But, the problem is then that analogy does not account for the embedding of other stories. “Sloosha’s Crossin’”, by the logic of the narrative hierarchy, should contain all other stories. It should be the largest one, encasing all other stories. But then, “The Pacific Journal” would be in the centre, which it cannot be, because it is divided in two parts.

“The Pacific Journal” can be seen as the largest doll, but only on the level of narrative discourse, as the plot, the novel begins and ends with this story, therefore it is the largest doll, and all other dolls are encased in it, with “Sloosha’s Crossin’” being the smallest doll. But this only works on the level of narrative organization, it does not explain the level of the content, the story, and the ambiguity is still unresolved.

## ETERNAL RECURRENCE

Another hint about the organization of the novel can be found in “Letters from Zedelghem”, and it is also a composition. Nietzsche is the favourite philosopher of Vyvyan Arys, and he names his final symphony „Eternal Recurrence“ in his honour.

Nietzsche’s notion of eternal recurrence presumes a circular model of time, in the infinity of which all possible events will eventually recur. History as a whole plays out over again, and on that basis Nietzsche challenges an individual to the gravest test of one’s authenticity : would we be willing to live the way we do, if knew that all our actions would get repeated throughout infinity. As Nietzsche puts it:

The Heaviest Burden. What if a demon crept after thee into thy loneliest loneliness some day or night, and said to thee: “This life, as thou livest it at present, and hast lived it, thou must live it once more, and also innumerable times; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh, and all the unspeakably small and great in thy life must come to thee again, and all in the same series and sequence and similarly this spider and this moonlight among the trees, and similarly this moment, and I myself. The eternal sand-glass of existence will ever be turned once more, and thou with it, thou speck of dust!” (Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* 341)

Nietzsche characterized his teaching “as the most extreme form of nihilism, and at the same time as the self-overcoming of nihilism, because his teaching is intended to recognize precisely the meaninglessness of an existence that recurs without any goal” (Lowith 56). Nietzsche’s belief in eternal recurrence is actually a counterweight against nihilism and the will to do nothing, it gives a man a new gravity after he has lost the old gravity that he had in Christian faith: “the redeeming man of the future is therefore not only the conqueror of God but also the conqueror of the nothing, for this nothing is itself the logical expression for the success of godlessness” (Lowith 57).

We could connect the circularity of the novel’s structure and the recurrence of many events with this theory, but the main impact Nietzsche has is in a small philosophical drama involving Frobisher and his justification of his suicide. Frobisher writes in his final letter:

Nietzsche's gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities. Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. In thirteen years from now we'll meet again at Gresham, ten years later I'll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet. Such elegant certainties comfort me. (Mitchell 490)

We could argue that Frobisher critically misinterprets Nietzsche’s life affirming lessons, and in fact succumbs to the very same nihilism against which Nietzsche’s theory warns. Frobisher’s line of reasoning is that with his life’s work completed, there is no reason to live anymore. He cannot stand a meaningless existence, much less revel in it. His certainty stems from his belief in his own peculiar interpretation of the narrative of eternal recurrence and, as we will explain later on, he is one of many characters in the novel who base their fundamental ethics on a belief in some grand narrative involving time.

His peculiar line of reasoning is that through all the chaos of the future, it will eventually come to be that his life will appear again, just as it was. However, the novel, on the level of the plot, proves otherwise, it is not a gramophone record, but something else, a strange *mise-en-abyme* structure that goes up and down in time, with variations, not strict repetitions.

## REINCARNATION VS METALEPSIS

Another way the stories are thematically tied together is by constantly hinting at the possibility that all the main characters are in fact reincarnations of one soul. In every story, except “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing”, one of the characters has a comet shaped birthmark on the shoulder. Frobisher has one: “She plays with that birthmark in the hollow of my shoulder, the one you said resembles a comet—can’t *abide* the woman dabbling with my skin.”(45) Luisa Rey also has one, and while reading his letters finds the coincidence somewhat disturbing: “Robert Frobisher mentions a comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder- blade and collar- bone. (...) I just don't believe in this crap. I just don't believe it. I don't”. (121-122) Timothy Cavendish, while editing the manuscript of *Half-Lives* dismisses the notion as new- age nonsense, although he also has one, but he does not take it too seriously: “ I, too, have a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet. Georgette nicknamed it Timbo's Turd.” (373) Sonmi~451, although she is a genetically engineered clone, also has a birthmark:

**I didn't know fabricants had birthmarks.**

We don't: they are genomed out. Every Medic who ever saw it xpressed bewilderment. My birthmark always caused me embarrassment when exposed. Ma-Leu-Da -108 called it „Sonmi-451's stain.“ You can see it, Archivist, between my collar- bone and shoulder- blade: here.

**Please show it to the orison. Xtraordinary. It resembles a comet.**

(204-205, bold in the original)

In “Sloosha’s Crossin’”, Zachry observes that Meronym has a birthmark:

Lady Moon lit a whoasome wyrd birthmark just'blow my friend's shoulder blade as she slepted finlsy. A sort o' tiny handmark it were, yay, a head o' six streaks strandin' off, pale 'gainst her dark skin, an' I curioed why I'd never seen it b'fore. I covered it over with the blanky so she didn't catch cold. (319)

The notion of reincarnation is directly linked with the novel’s title, and Zachry’s explains his tribe's view of reincarnation by using the atlas of clouds as a metaphor for the transmigration of souls: “Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed

from or who the soul'll be morrow? Only Sonmi the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds". (324)

An interesting thing with this metaphor is that it is also used by Cavendish, when trapped in the nursing home and pondering the ephemeral nature of life: "What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds". (389) We know that Cavendish is more than sceptical about the notion of reincarnation, but it would seem that metaphors also cross ages like clouds cross skies.

Regardless of the characters' stance towards it, the notion of reincarnation as a unifying principle of the story is quite tempting because it provides some kind of fictive continuity between the characters and pulls the multiple plot threads into one, regardless of the temporal distance between the narratives. But the novel's complex diegetic structure and uncertain ontology make this difficult.

If all the main characters are reincarnations of one soul, "crossing ages like clouds cross skies" (389), they should appear at the same ontological level in the narrative. As soon as the novel poses such a question about the ontological status of its narrative worlds, it becomes clear that we are not dealing with an example of modernist, epistemological fiction, but with a postmodern, post-cognitive text, as McHale would say. We have already discussed the discontinuity in the structure of embedding between Somni~451's and Cavendish's diegetic level. She watches a movie, but has no access to the memoir. She acknowledges the movie as "picaresque" (243), implying that she regards it as a work of fiction. Beyond that, there is an even bigger ontological gap in the narrative hierarchy between the Cavendish's narrative and "Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery". Of all the narratives in the novel, "Half-Lives" is the most explicitly fictional. Peter Keough, commenting on how the novels "factual" sections intertwine, Borges-like, with inventions of the "fiction", calls "Half-Lives" "an illusion that gives the other illusions reality. That should keep English departments busy for a while". "Half-Lives" is immediately recognizable as fiction not just by its style and numbered chapters, but by its omniscient narrator. As an example of the narrator's omniscience we could provide this paragraph which illustrates the narrator's omniscient knowledge:

Isaac Sachs looks down on a brilliant New England morning. Labyrinthine suburbs of ivory mansionettes and silk lawns inset with turquoise swimming-pools. The executive-jet window is cool against his face. Six feet directly beneath his seat is a suitcase in the baggage hold containing enough C-4 to turn an airplane into a meteor. (408)

It can also be illustrated by Cavendish's snide comment when he first encounters the text: "... a MS titled *Half-lives* – lousy name for a work of fiction – and subtitled *The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. Lousier and lousier. Its lady author is dubiously named Hilary V. Hush..." (157–158). Cavendish in the second part of his narrative actually sees the elusive author: "A photo was enclosed, and it turns out the 'V' is for 'Vincent'! And what a lard- bucket! I'm no Chippendale myself, but Hilary has the girth to fill not two but three airline economy seats." (202)

Due to the explicit fictiveness of "Half-Lives", its hypodiegetic narratives may also be regarded as being fictional – in that case "Letters from Zedelghem" and "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing" would also occupy a different ontological level. This makes the notion of reincarnation somewhat implausible. Timothy Cavendish cannot be a reincarnation of Luisa Rey if that Luisa Rey is a character in a manuscript he is currently not just reading but also editing.

What we have at work here is in fact a postmodern narrative device of violating narrative levels, called metalepsis. Transition from one narrative level to another can in principle be achieved only by the act of narrating, introducing into one situation the knowledge of another situation by the means of discourse. Any other form of transition would be impossible or transgressive. Hence, according to Genette, metalepsis is an

intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse (as in Cortazar), produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical (when, as in Sterne or Diderot, it is presented in a joking tone) or fantastic. We will extend the term narrative metalepsis to all these transgressions. (234-235).

The aforementioned Cortázar's short story „Continuity of Parks“ is a classic example of metalepsis: a man reads a novel in which a killer, approaching through a park, enters a house in order to murder his lover's husband — the man reading the novel. The continuity in the title of the novel is that paradoxical continuity between the nested narrative and the primary narrative which violates the hierarchy of ontological levels.

As a clever auto-referential parody of this metaleptic conundrum there is a peculiar scene in "Letters from Zedelghem" where one girl asks Frobisher whether he has met Sherlock Holmes:

“Mr. Frobisher, are you well acquainted with Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street?” Well, thought I, the day might not be a complete wreck. A girl with a taste for irony must conceal some depths. But Marie-Louise was serious! A congenital dunce. No, I replied, I didn’t know Mr. Holmes personally, but he and David Copperfield could be seen playing billiards at my club every Wednesday. (Mitchell 466)

However, the novel also abounds with hidden flashbacks or flashforwards, premonitions or strange recognitions, depending on the point of view of the reader in regards to his familiarity with the narrative structure of the novel and his knowledge of the ontological problems of the story. For example, there is a scene in which Vyvyan Arys tells Frobisher about a dream he had, in which he was in a “... nightmarish café, brilliantly lit, but underground, with no way out. I’d been dead a long, long time. The waitresses all had the same face. The food was soap, the only drink was cups of lather”. (42) For the first time reader, this is a flash forward to a narrative s/he has not encountered yet. But, for the reader familiar with the metaleptic problems posed by “Half-Lives”, this is also a metaleptic transgression because a fictional character has dreams about something outside his world.

In a strange reversal of this situation, we have another scene, this time with Frobisher, happening in the second part of the story. The first time reader has now become familiar with the strangeness of the novels narrative organization, having read “Sloosha’s Crossin’” and descending now back to “The Pacific Journal”. Just before he departs from Zedelghem for the last time, Frobisher experiences a strong urge to cut sleeping Vyvyan Ayr’s throat: “A blue vein throbbed over Ayr’s Adam’s apple and I fought off an unaccountably strong urge to open it up with my penknife. Most uncanny. Not quite *déjà vu*, more *jamais vu*.” (467) Unlike *déjà vu*, which is the illusion of having already experienced something actually being experienced for the first time, *jamais vu* is the experience of being unfamiliar with a person or situation that is actually very familiar. Frobisher experience of *jamais vu* corresponds with the reader recalling the similar situation in “Sloosha’s Crossin’”, where Zachry notices a sleeping Kona and actually cuts his throat. It is as if Frobisher became aware of his fictionality for the moment, and of its *mise-en-abyme* reflection in the story previously encountered by the reader, and has taken the role of the reader for the moment.

As Genette states, metaleptic games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they try to defy, a boundary that is “*precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself* -a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which

one tells the story and the world of which one tells” (236, italics in the original). This effect of unease was recognized by Borges: “Such inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious” (quoted in Genette 236). This metaleptic anxiety would have us consider the possibility that we are not so extradiegetic as we think, but in fact belong to a diegetic level of some narrative: we could also be fictional, a part of some narrative matrix we are not even aware of.

It is interesting how the most fictional protagonist in the novel, Luisa Rey, experiences the most profound metaleptic doubts of this type. For example, while reading Frobisher’s letters, she is mesmerized by the “dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories.” (Mitchell 121-122). When she listens to Frobisher’s Cloud Atlas Sextet for the first time, “the sound is pristine, riverlike, spectral, hypnotic ... *intimately familiar*. Luisa stands, entranced, as if living in a stream of time. “I *know* this music,” she tells the store clerk...” (213). Other characters also react to Luisa in a peculiar way. For example Sixsmith tells her after meeting her for the first time: “Do you know?” he says, “I feel I’ve known you for years, not ninety minutes.” (97) She also has these metaleptic *déjà vu* moments: “A swarm of *déjà vu* haunts Luisa as she stuffs her belongings into her overnight bag. *Robert Frobisher doing a dine and dash from another hotel*”.(77, italics in the original) For comparison, Cavendish, who is not so ontologically unstable, also has similar moments, but in his case, it is not *déjà vu*, but just a memory of a similar situation encountered in the book he has read: “On the night of December 15 (I think), I woke myself up in the early hours, put on my dressing gown, and let myself into the dim corridor(...) I thought of Hilary V. Hush’s Luisa Rey creeping around Swannekke B.(Behold my bifocals.)” (189).

We could say that poor Luisa Rey is suffering from a serious case of metaleptic anxiety, and is clearly obsessed with this Frobisher fellow. At the end of the second part her story she finally gets the second part of his letters, and “she removes one of the yellowed envelopes, postmarked 10 October 1931, holds it against her nose and inhales” (453). She then asks the ultimate metaleptic question:

*Are molecules of Zedelghem Chateau, of Robert Frobisher’s hand, dormant in this paper for forty-four years, now swirling in my lungs, in my blood? Who is to say?*  
(453, italics in original)

This is a tricky question, to say the least. The reason why molecules are mentioned here is because they imply a concrete, material existence, on the same physical and therefore ontological level of both her and Robert Frobisher. This question is directed to the person reading the novel, who is at this point familiar with the fictional status of Luisa's narrative, and who, if reading a physical book, will probably turn the page, see the title "Letters from Zedelghem", turn the page again and begin reading the letter dated as Zedelghem. 10<sup>th</sup>-X-1931 (457). The reader is free to ponder this question or to ignore it completely, but in any case, the choice is up to him/her. Regardless of her ontological or spiritual "continuity" with Frobisher, Luisa has made the metaleptical connection between herself and the reader, and they both start doing the same thing at this moment – reading Frobisher's letters.

The reader who then goes through Frobisher's letters, and the rest of Ewing's journal might even feel kind of dizzy from this circular journey, arriving at the same place where s/he started, the Pacific Ocean of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If the reader decides to read the novel again, s/he might immediately notice something interesting. When Ewing witnesses the public flogging of an unknown Moriori, the reader already knows this is Autua, s/he recognizes him. But Ewing cannot recognize him, and he is surprised: "...a peculiar thing occurred. The beaten savage raised his slumped head, found *my* eye & shone me a look of uncanny, amicable knowing! As if a theatrical performer saw a long-lost friend in the Royal Box and, undetected by the audience, communicated his recognition" (6). We could argue that this time Autua's look of uncanny, amicable knowing is directly focused at the reader, as if saying hello again. This is described by the theatrical situation known as "breaking the fourth wall", in this case the transgression of the ontological boundary between the world of the reader and the world of the character in the novel. This encounter between Ewing and Autua is crucial for the rest of the narrative, because Autua later saves Ewing, but there is no other explanation for this uncanny, amicable knowing between them except metaleptic transgression. This would also explain why Ewing does not have a birthmark shaped like a comet. This would be redundant, because the whole notion of reincarnation is gradually revealed to be a metaleptic narrative strategy, and Autua's metaleptic recognition functions as the same thing. So, we could conclude that the novel from the beginning constructs its story outside the standard epistemological frames, and is based on ontologically ambiguous narrative logic.



## THE ATLAS OF CLOUDS

What makes this novel a novel, and not a collection of stories? We have previously tried to answer this question on the level of discourse, and got entangled in various metaleptic transgressions and contradictory structural models, preventing a single unifying explanation. However, these stories are connected by the mirroring effect of the novel's *mise-en-abyme* structure – the same narrative pattern repeats itself, reincarnates itself in each story, in different characters and circumstances. We will now examine the novel on the level of story, and try to explain how the basic themes also repeat themselves in each story.

These stories are gathered together under the title *Cloud Atlas*. This atlas is mentioned twice in the novel, first by Cavendish in one of his fits of despondency about the ephemeral nature of life:

Three or four times only in my youth did I glimpse the Joyous Isles, before they were lost to fogs, depressions, cold fronts, ill winds and contrary tides... I mistook them for adulthood. Assuming they were a fixed feature in my life's voyage, I neglected their latitude, their longitude, their approach. Young ruddy fool. What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds. (389)

Weary of life's ephemerality, Cavendish pines for some fixed order, some ultimate narrative that would explain everything, and would always be true, regardless of changing circumstances. Atlas of clouds is also mentioned by Zachry, as a peculiar metaphor for the transmigration of souls:

I watched clouds awobly from the floro'that kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same it's still a cloud an' so is a soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be morrow? Only Sonmi the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds. (324)

Atlas of clouds, in both cases, suggests something impossible, a fixed, static, never changing order imposed upon arbitrary randomness of life. Zachry's tribe believes in transmigration of souls in every direction of time, they did not see time as strictly linear, but circular. They regard Sonmi as a goddess, and only she knows where the soul will be reincarnated: "Sonmi's the east'n'west, Sonmi's the map an' the edges o' the map an' b'yonder the edges" (160). In

both cases, this atlas of clouds is a book, a narrative of some higher order, something ineffable, available only to gods. However, we also have this book in front of us, called *Cloud Atlas*. Just like the clouds are souls, or individual human manifestation of Zachry's atlas of clouds, so are these stories that make up the novel the individual manifestations of *Cloud Atlas*, reincarnations of one grand narrative.

To see what this narrative is about, we can start at the beginning of the novel, when Adam Ewing meets Dr. Goose on one of the beaches of Chatman Islands. Goose is looking for cannibal's teeth that are quite valuable because they are used in fashioning denture-sets for the nobility. Dr. Goose explains to Ewing how Chatman's Island's were once a "cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak" (3), and Ewing later learns about the extinction of peaceful native tribe of Moriori by the invading cannibals of Maori tribe. Dr. Goose himself is a proponent of philosophy of predacity, which he sums up quite simply: "The Weak are Meat the Strong do Eat" (508). During his journey, Ewing will behold various manifestations of this maxim, witnessing various colonial exploitations, a molestation of a cabin boy that ends in suicide, and on a brink of death caused by naively believing Goose he will realize he is not an actual doctor, but a devious poisoner and a robber. While robbing Adam, Goose explains his theories in more visceral detail:

Surgeons are a singular brotherhood, Adam. To us, people aren't sacred beings crafted in the Almighty's image, no, people are joints of meat; diseased, leathery meat, yes, but meat ready for the skewer & the spit." He mimicked my usual voice, very well. "'But why *me*, Henry, are we not friends?' Well, Adam, even friends are made of meat.' Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk, I am told, is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. Where is the mystery? 'But, Henry, this is wicked!' But, Adam, the world *is* wicked. Maoris prey on Moriori, Whites prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels, first mates on cabin boys, Death on the Living. 'The weak are meat, the strong do eat.' (523-524)

Just like cannibals' teeth are transmuted into dentures, so are these relations of predacity described by Goose transmuted in each following story. In the next story Frobisher comments "Happy, dying Ewing, who never saw the unspeakable forms waiting around history's corner." (479). It is 1931 and these unspeakable forms are the world wars, between which Frobisher's story is set. Frobisher's brother Adrian fought and died in WW1, and Frobisher unsuccessfully tries to find his grave in the military cemetery. Morty Dhondt, a Belgian jeweller that drives him to the cemetery, tells Frobisher: "Another war is *always* coming,

Robert. They are never properly extinguished. What sparks wars? The will to power, the backbone of human nature”. (462) He later explains the two-fold nature of this will: “Our will to power, our science, and those v. faculties that elevated us from apes, to savages, to modern man, are the same faculties that’ll snuff out Homo Sapiens before this century is out”. (462) Frobisher agrees with him: “science devises ever bloodier means of war until humanity’s power’s of destruction overcome our powers of creation and our civilisation drives itself to extinction” (462).

Humanity’s power of destruction and the power of creation both stem from this will, the will to power, a term first used by Nietzsche, “the only reality is the will to grow stronger of every centre of force-not self preservation, but the will to appropriate, dominate, increase, grow stronger”. (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 689). Nietzsche used this term in a complex manner, but we could say it is a drive to exercise power over others at any cost, not just on individual level, but on every level: “the will to accumulate force is special to the phenomena of life, to nourishment, procreation, inheritance – to society, state, custom, authority”. (689) Morty Dhondt also says: “You can see the will to power in bedrooms, kitchens, factories, unions, and the borders of states. Listen to this and remember it. The nation-state is merely human nature inflated to monstrous proportions”. (Mitchell 462) This character also mentions a proverb that functions as a complementary sequel to “The Weak are Meat the Strong do Eat”: “To those upon the menu, the Sauce is no Concern”. (461)

In Sonmi’s world, the metaphor of cannibalism is not just realized but also institutionalized - replicants like her, after they reach twelve years of service, are sent to the so called “Xultation”, expecting to be freed and liberated and to retire in some tropical heaven, but in fact they are killed, and recycled to make Soap, with which other replicants are fed. She explains this economics of corpocracy as a perfect food cycle:

The genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter, for wombtanks, but most of all, for Soap. What cheaper way to supply this protein than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives? Additionally, leftover “reclaimed proteins” are used to produce Papa Song food products, eaten by consumers in the corp’s dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle. (359-360)

In Zachry’s world, Frobisher’s and Dhondt’s predictions have come true, humanity has finally managed to devour itself in a nuclear cataclysm, reducing the world to a few tribes, but even then the will to power repeats its cannibalism, there are two tribes again – the Valleysmen,

and the cannibal tribe of Kona, echoing the situation from the Ewing's tale – the pacifist Moriori and bloodthirsty Maori.

While discussing the difference between the savages and “Civ’lizeds” with Zachry, Meronym argues that being Civ’lized is not just having some kind of laws, but is a question of control of basic urges: *“The savage sat ’fies his needs now. He’s hungry, he’ll eat. He’s angry, he’ll knuckly. He’s swellin, he’ll shoot up a woman. His master is his will, an if his will say-soes ‘Kill’ he’ll kill. Like fangy animals”*. (317, italic in original). Now, according to Meronym, the “Civ’lized” has the same needs, but also has some basic foresight controlling these basic urges:

*He’ll eat half his food now, yay, but plant half so he won’t go hungry morrow. He’s angry, he’ll stop’n think why so he won’t get angry next time .He’s swellin, well, he’s got sisses an daughters what need respectin so he’ll respect his bros sisses an daughters. His will is his slave, an if his will say-soes, “Don’t!” he won’t, nay.* (317, italic in original)

Each story recounts in its own manner this clash between the “Civ’lized” and the savage, between those with basic foresight and those who are not able to resist the urge for immediate gratification. As noted by Parker, Mitchell also reinforces Meronym’s message through the very structure of his novel, “the suspended conclusions compelling us to delay our need for closure—unless, of course, we skip ahead, in which case we will miss the point.” (Parker 214)

Meronym explains to Zachry how the will to power both birthed and murdered civilization: “Yay, Old Uns’ Smart mastered sicks, miles, seeds an made miracles ord’nary, but it didn’t master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o humans, yay, a hunger for more”. (272) This hunger for more lead to nuclear cataclysm, and Meronym describes how it made the “Old Uns rip out the skies an boil up the seas an poison soil with crazed atoms an donkey ’bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an babbits was freakbirthed. Fin’ly, bit’ly, then quicksharp, states busted into bar’bric tribes an the Civ’lize Days ended”. (273) This is the ultimate consequence of this untamed urge for immediate gratification, and we can concur with Parker who says that the lesson behind it is that “Civilization entails replacing the will to power with the will to preserve if there is to be a future at all.” (Parker 214)

Every human is both the savage and Civ’lized, and this does not depend just on beliefs, or tribal affiliations or time period. As Meronym says, the true mark of Civ’lized is to see beyond binary oppositions, and hope for better: “Some savages what I knowed got a

beautsome Civ'lized heart beatin in their ribs. Maybe some Kona. Not nuff to say-so their hole tribe, but who knows one day? One day.” (Mitchell 160)

Meronym's words are echoed in Sonmi's Declarations, which posit that the uncontrolled will to power is that which ignores the Other: “My fifth Declaration posits how, in a cycle as old as tribalism, ignorance of the Other engenders fear; fear engenders hatred; hatred engenders violence; violence engenders further violence until the only 'rights,' the only law, are whatever is willed by the most powerful”. (344) Zachry's tribe and the Moriori are both peaceful and respect the Other because they have established a religion based on reincarnation, in which murder is the ultimate taboo. Zachry hesitates to kill the Kona warrior who attacked his family: “See, murderin' was forbid-ded by Valleysmen law, yay, if you stole another's life noun'd barter nothin' with you nor see you nor nothin' 'cos your soul was so poisoned you may give 'em a sickness” (300). He thinks that “If I'd been rebirthed a Kona in this life, he could be me an' I'd be killin' myself” (301). He kills him, however: “I knowed I'd be payin' for it by'n'by but like I said a while back, in our busted world the right thing ain't always possible” (302). Moriori of Chatman's Island also thought that killing others is equal to killing your soul: “Since time immemorial, the Moriori's priestly caste dictated that whosoever spilt a man's blood killed his own mana- his honour, his worth, his standing& his soul. No Moriori would shelter, feed, converse, or even see the persona non grata” (12). As noted by Hicks, the notion reincarnation in this case serves as a kind of moral code: “This sense of identification with Other, of the interchangeability of identities across time, brings into focus how a cyclical ontology could enable a positive departure from the self-interested conventions of individualism”.

But, throughout the novel we can see how societal norms change in regards to the recognition of the Other. For example, the notion of soul in Sonmni~451's story is desanctified and takes the form of a “soulring” – in essence a small microchip that gives to those who own it their basic individuality – the status of Consumer. Fabricant's like Sonmni~451 are not even recognized as individual beings, and aim of her Declarations is to fight this notion on which the institutionalized cannibalism of that society is based:

**Popular wisdom has it that fabricants don't have personalities.**

This fallacy is propagated for the comfort of purebloods.

**“Comfort”? How do you mean?**

To enslave an individual troubles your consciences, Archivist, but to enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-wheeler ford, ethically. Because you cannot discern our

differences, you believe we have none. But make no mistake: even same-stem fabricants cultured in the same wombtank are as singular as snow-flakes. (Mitchell 239, bold in original)

In Cavendish's stories, these non-entities are the elderly, they are also ignored by the society, and exposed to various mistreatments:

You will not apply for membership, but the tribe of the elderly will claim you. Your present will not keep pace with the world's.(...) On escalators, on trunk roads, in supermarket aisles, the living will overtake you, incessantly. Elegant women will not see you. Store detectives will not see you. Salespeople will not see you, unless they sell stair lifts or fraudulent insurance policies. Only babies, cats, and drug addicts will acknowledge your existence. (97)

His memoir is in a way a subversion of this societal hegemony behind the invisibility and mistreatment of the elderly. His memoir was made into film, which was shown to Sonmi, and had a profound impact on her because she could relate it the conditions in her society:

...I was engrossed. The past is a world both indescribably different from and yet subtly similar to Nea So Copros. People sagged and uglified as they aged in those days: no dewdrugs. Elderly pure-bloods waited to die in prisons for the senile: no fixed-term life spans, no euthanasium. Dollars circulated as little sheets of paper and the only fabricants were sickly livestock. However, corpocracy was emerging and social strata was demarked, based on dollars and, curiously, the quantity of melanin in one's skin. (125)

The viewing of this movie is what enabled Sonmi to see beyond the fixed ideological perspective imposed by her society. By seeing a narrative depicting an older form of society, she can draw parallels, and see how things change, how the current situation stems from something older, it has not been always so. This is the case in each narrative. For example, in Ewing's case he encounters ideologies of racism and colonialism, but also hears about the Moriori and Maori, he manages to overcome his prejudices and helps Autua, who in turn saves his life, and Ewing vows to join the abolitionists. We could say that in each story, the main character encounters some incarnation of the old cannibals maxim, both on individual and societal level, fights against it, inspired by older stories, and leaving behind him his/her own story, which inspire others.

To conclude, we could go back to Cavendish, who imagines one fixed story "a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable" (389). *Cloud Atlas* subverts this notion of a

fixed narrative. Although the human nature is portrayed as unchangingly predatory, violent and depraved, the novel also posits that no matter how deeply entrenched these dominant ideological narratives are, there is always place for another story that can subvert them. Overall, we can say that even on the level of the story, the novel is a story about stories, which makes it again a metafictional novel.

## METAFICTIONALITY

According to Patricia Waugh, metafiction is “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). Waugh argues that metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition between the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion:

In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. The two processes are held together in a formal tension which breaks down the distinctions between ‘creation’ and ‘criticism’ and merges them into the concepts of ‘interpretation’ and ‘deconstruction. (Waugh 6)

These processes are more than evident in *Cloud Atlas*, not just at the level of its thematic concerns and the reader’s involvement with its ontological puzzles, but also at the level of characters in the novel. In this regard, Timothy Cavendish, as an experienced editor and a publisher of fiction, is the most metafictional character in the novel. Let us consider the following paragraph:

As an experienced editor I disapprove of backflashes, foreshadowings and tricky devices, they belong in the 1980s with MAs in Postmodernism and Chaos Theory. I make no apology, however, for (re)starting my own narrative with my version of that shocking affair. (Mitchell 152)

At one moment in his narrative, Cavendish finds himself simultaneously in a role of the reader and editor, and a metafictional critic of another embedded narrative – he reads the manuscript for the novel called *Half-lives*. Cavendish is an owner of a small publishing company, and he begins to make plans on how to make the novel more readable and profitable: “One or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert

Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippie-druggy-new age. (...) But, overall, I concluded the young-hack-versus-corporate-corruption-thriller had potential.” (373)

Instances of metafictionality abound in this novel due to its interlinked structure. Each character is not just a character in his/her own novel, but also a writer of his/her own narrative, and a reader and a critic of other narratives. For example, when Frobisher reads the journal of Adam Ewing, he is sceptical of his authenticity:

Ewing puts me in mind of Melville's bumbler Cpt. Delano in „Benito Cereno“, blind to all conspirators-he hasn't spotted his trusty Doctor Henry Goose (sic) is a vampire, fuelling his hypochondria in order to poison him, slowly, for his money. Something shifty about the journal's authenticity- seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true- but who would bother forging such a journal, and why? (64)

The complicated structure of mediation of the stories also serves to make the reader aware of the ultimate fictionality of the stories. Ewing's journal has been published and possibly modified by his son, who, in one way, on the level of discourse, has the last word in the novel: “Here my father's handwriting slips into spasmodic illegibility. —J.E.” (529). The same things happens with Zachr'y tale, which is also retold by his son, which the reader finds out only after the story has been told, and is left wandering about its authenticity. In that sense, the novel is framed on both sides by its exposed fictionality.

The most directly metafictional part of the novel can be found in “Half-Lives“ when a character called Isaac Sachs ponders the complexities of time and history and in a way engages in a metafictional interpretation of the novel itself:

- Exposition: the workings of the actual past + the virtual past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history such as the sinking of the Titanic. The disaster as it actually occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a virtual sinking of the Titanic, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever truer. The actual past is brittle, ever – dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever- brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/expose as fraudulent. (408)

Linda Hutcheon says almost the same thing while explaining the role of historiographic metafiction which “self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those past events through their discursive inscription, through their traces in the present”. (97)



This process of ever increasing virtuality described by Sachs echoes the views of Jean Baudrillard, exposed in his philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation*, where the scholar examines the relationship between the image and reality, and argues that mass media is neutralizing reality for us and achieves so in the following stages:

Such would be the successive phases of the image:  
it is the reflection of a profound reality;  
it masks and denatures a profound reality;  
it masks the absence of a profound reality;  
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;  
it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

Linda Hutcheon argues that postmodern art works to contest this “simulacrizaton” process of mass culture by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality. (224). As Hutcheon goes further, “it is not that truth and reference have ceased to exist, as Baudrillard claims; it is that they have ceased to be unproblematic issues – We are not witnessing a degeneration into the hyperreal without origin or reality, but a questioning of what “real” can mean and how we can *know* it.” (224)

Adam Ewing, in his contemplations about many racist and colonial ideologies also mentions the relativity and subjectivity of each truth: “As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrums of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent. “(Mitchell 17)

Accordingly, Sachs then goes on to ponder the relation between the present and the past, and the narratives that form that link:

- The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies+legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks+ is the right to ‘landscape’ the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune. (408)

History is subject to retrospective change, it is shaped according to ideologies of those in power. For example, there is a discussion about diplomacy in Frobisher’s chapter: “Oh, diplomacy”, said M.D., in his element, it mops up war’s spillages; legitimizes its outcomes; gives the strong state the means to impose its will on a weaker one, while saving its fleets and battalions for weightier opponents.” (462) History is shaped from the present, and the most powerful narrator has the last say on things, in the way that it chooses which of these narratives of the “virtual past” are chosen to represent the real past, which sinks into obscurity and is gradually forgotten, such as, for example, the old idols of colonized natives in Ewing’s

tale: “The Native children don’t even know the names of the old idols no more. It’s all rats’ nests & rubble now. That’s what all beliefs turn to one day. Rats’ nests & rubble.”(28) This “landscaping”, as noted by Parker, is also at work, for example, when the British renamed the Moriori’s Rehoku as the Chatham Island (Parker, 208). Sachs then goes to question the relation between the present and the future:

- Symmetry demands an actual + virtual future, too. We imagine how next week, next year or 2225 will shape up- a virtual future, constructed by wishes, prophecies + daydreams. This virtual future may influence the actual future, as in self-fulfilling prophecy, but the actual future will eclipse our virtual one as surely as tomorrow eclipses today. Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone. (Mitchell 408)

Hence, the whole structure of the novel illustrates how the virtual future may influence the actual future, because it takes the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy – when the reader ascends from the Ewing’s time frame to the post-apocalyptic world of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” he is made aware how this state of affairs is a logical consequence of the dominant ideologies presented in the stories leading up to it. However, as the ending of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” suggests, when Zachry’s son turns on the orison the future does not stop there, it continues and with it the construction of virtual futures, based on the never-ending transference of narratives and beliefs that shape it.

The next question Sachs asks is quite expected – is there a difference between the actual past and the actual past:

- Q: is there a meaningful distinction between one simulacrum of smoke, mirrors + shadows- the actual past-from another such simulacrum- the actual future? (408)

Of course there is no difference between the actual past and the actual future, because we can never actually reach them outside the narratives that shape them. These narratives are never the actual past or future, but a system of belief. The novel illustrates this also by its structure, because when the reader descends down from “Sloosha’s Crossin’”, the future becomes the past, which is revealed to be just as constructed by “wishes, prophecies, daydreams”. Each character reads or hears or watches something from the past, analogous to their own situation, which enables them to re-contextualize their own situation, but they never know the actual past, because every narrative is mediated by someone and thereby undergoes various changes.

Fredric Jameson in his study *The Antinomies of Realism* mentions a new form of the historical novel “which is defined by its relation to the future fully as much as to past” (305), and includes *Cloud Atlas* among those novels. According to Jameson, “the philosophical question about future history and indeed about the future history of the planet itself is one which all true historical novels must raise today” (306). He then points out that this *grand recit* is subtly displaced and substituted by the “language game” of the unfinished narratives and their succession: “We do not stop asking the illicit question about the former, modestly resigning ourselves to the latter in its absence; we use the later to pose the former, which we ask through its material disguise”. (306)

The next point Sachs makes is the model of matrioshka dolls that we mentioned before in relation to the organization of the novel’s structure of embedding:

- One model of time: an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments, each ‘shell’ (the present) encased inside a nest of ‘shells’ (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of ‘now’ likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future. (408)

According to Waugh, metafictional writings in providing a critique of their own methods of construction, “not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.” (2) The *mise-en-abyme* structure of the novel’s narrative embedding can also be applied to the narrative situation of life in general. This infinite structure of embedding implies that we can never reach the highest diegetic level, we are always embedded in our past stories and we also embed our future stories, beliefs, hopes. We can never leave this matrioshka, we can never be extradiegetic, our lives are our stories and beliefs. Adam Ewing’s final journal entry directly relates to this:

Scholars discern motions in history & formulate these motions into rules that govern the rises & falls of civilizations. My belief runs contrary, however. To wit: history admits no rules; only outcomes. What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous acts.

What precipitates acts? Belief.

Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind’s mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such humanity is surely brought into being... (527–528)

Although it all seems quite glum, Ewing's journal, and the novel in a way, end on a positive note. Although the human nature is a "many-headed hydra" (529), and many hardships await those who battle it, Ewing asserts that there is always a possibility for individual action, no matter how insignificant it seems, that would usurp these dominant narratives of violence and depravity: "only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (529). Ewing is actually quite optimistic, and posits an alternative to the cannibalistic dystopias encountered throughout the novel, which depends, as everything else, on belief, on narratives we tell ourselves: "If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this world (...) if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass". ( 528)

Every little drop, every rebel narrative that usurps the hegemony of cannibalism counts, because, as Sonmi-451 said to her tormentors, quoting Seneca's warning to Nero, "No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor". (365) Although the last word may be in the hands of those who have the power, there is always a possibility for a new last word, for a new story. Let us return to Genette for a moment, who notes that: "The real author of the narrative is not only he who tells it, but also, and at times even more, he who hears it. And who is' not necessarily the one it is addressed to: there are always people off to the side." (262) The novel shows how in each narrative there are always these people on to the side, who hear the story, and inspired by it write their own, which is heard by someone else, who also write their stories, etc. The process of writing and telling stories never stops, and the novel also demonstrates that narrative function of embedded stories – stories are also told just for the sake of telling, not just for one thousand and one night, but always, from a maritime journal of a naive notary to a fireplace yarn of some tribesmen, and beyond. There's never one ultimate atlas of clouds that could map and enclose the ever-changing shifting human reality, and the novel by exposing and discussing all these metafictional mechanism engages the reader to do the same and question the narratives of the worlds inside and outside the book.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, we could say that *Cloud Atlas* offers an interesting and intense reading experience. The aim of this paper was to map the reader's voyage through this atlas of clouds, which began by reconstructing the stories and connecting their separate parts. The next stage

was an attempt to find a coherent narrative structure which could connect these stories as instances of embedded narratives. This turned out to be futile, as the novel's recursive ontological ambiguity prevents clear-cut epistemological interpretations. We then discussed how these stories are connected by a complex strategy of metaleptic transgressions, and by their shared thematic concerns, both underlying the novel's postmodern metafictional aspects.

Overall, this is a memorable novel, and worth reading several times, because every subsequent reading reveals something new, one more connection or reflection in its six-fold *mise-en-abyme* structure, or to rephrase the final sentence of the novel, one of a multitude of drops in the ocean. The postmodern narrative strategies of the novel are not there just for mere ludic purpose, but they serve to underline serious and relevant questions about the world we live in. It would be quite hard to argue that the world, with its geopolitical and ecocidal savagery is not going towards the post-apocalyptic future described in "Sloosha's Crossin'". But, as the novel tells us, another story is always possible.

## WORKS CITED:

- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981. Print
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995. Print
- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983 (1961). Print.
- Brooke-Rose, Christine. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal. Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic*. London-New York : Cambridge University Press, 1981. Print
- Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1978. Print
- Coste Didier and John Pier. "Narrative Levels". *The Living Book of Narratology*. Eds. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, Wolf Schmidt. Hamburg: Hamburg University Press. PDF. Web. 18 Feb 2015
- Fludernik, Monika. *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print
- Genette, Gérard.. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay In Method*. Trans. Jane E Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983 (1980). Print.
- Hicks, Heather. "This Time Round: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the Apocalyptic Problem of Historicism". *Postmodern Culture*, Volume 20, Number 3, May 2010. Web 18 February 2014.
- Hutcheon Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. Verso: London/New York, 2013. Print
- Keough, Peter. "Atlas shrugs: David Mitchell gets off on his *Cloud*". The Boston Phoenix. The Phoenix Media/Communications Group, 27 Aug. 2004. Web. 18 February 2015
- Lowith Karl. *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997. Print
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Print
- McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York: Methuen, 1987. Print.
- Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. London: Hodder, 2004. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Joyful Wisdom (La Gaya Scienza)*. Trans. by Thomas Common with Poetry Rendered by Paul V. Cohn and Maude D. Petre. Web. July 13 2014
- The Will to Power*. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967. Print

Parker, Alyson Jo. "David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* of narrative constraints and environmental limits". *Time: Limits and constraints*. Eds. Jo Alyson Parker, Paul A. Harris and Christian Steineck. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 201-217. Print

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Methuen, 1983. Print.

Sorlin, Sandrine. "A Linguistic Approach to David Mitchell's Science Fiction Stories in *Cloud Atlas*". *Miscelánea* 34, 2006: 75–89. Web. 18 Feb 2015

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984. Print

## ABSTRACT:

The aim of this paper is to analyse the structure of the novel *Cloud Atlas*, by David Mitchell, from the narratological point of view. We examined the novel's intricate *mise-en-abyme* structure of narrative embedding which presents a curious dilemma between two opposing models of embedding and framing: discourse and story. It is argued that the ambivalent and ontologically unstable narrative structure that connects the six stories prevents singular epistemological interpretations and presents a markedly postmodern, post-cognitive, ontologically foregrounded text. The complicated structure of mediation of the stories also serves to make the reader aware of the ultimate fictionality of the stories.

The paper examines how the stories are connected by a net of metaleptic transgressions, among which the notion of reincarnation is the most prominent one. It can be concluded that the novel on the thematic level also deals with ontological ambiguities that prevent a unifying thematic interpretation. Nevertheless, the six stories that form the novel are thematically connected by their shared metafictional concerns. Although the human nature is portrayed in every story as unchangingly predatory, violent and depraved, the novel also posits that no matter how deeply entrenched the dominant ideological narratives are, there is always room for another story that can subvert them. Even on the story level, the novel is a story about stories, which makes it again a metafictional novel. The last part of the paper examines the explicitness with which the novel exposes its metafictionality by self-consciously and systematically drawing attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality and how this, in turn, engages the reader to do the same and question the narratives of the worlds inside and outside the book.

KEY WORDS: *Cloud Atlas*, David Mitchell, narrative levels, embedding, *mise-en-abyme*, metalepsis, metafictionality.